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LEADERSHIP: FACING THE FAIRYTALE

We all like a story. As children we know a good story when we hear it. Good stories have a common beginning, “Once upon a time . . .,” and end with “. . . and they lived happily ever after.” Well-known stories include Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, complete with ballroom gowns, unbelievable good luck and a magic kiss. These are stories of innocents mistreated. We feel for them but with anticipation look toward the perfect ending— “and they lived happily ever after.” Since I have young granddaughters and nieces, I have been kept up to date on the newer versions of these classic stories. Take, for instance, *Enchanted*. In this story, a perfect princess lives a perfect life assisted in her tasks by forest friends who sing and dance their way through life until suddenly the princess finds herself transported on her wedding day to New York City. In this twist on the old tale, she finds a man better than her fairy prince and the prince too finds, in NYC, another woman for his dreams. In this case the story ends with a double dose of “and they lived happily ever after.” Or take the case of Shrek, a somewhat grumpy fellow who lives in a swamp, falls in love with a princess and on her wedding day saves her (with a little help from a donkey and a dragon) from marrying a rather pompous and annoying prince. This story also ends with “and they lived happily ever after,” even if it was in a swamp. From these and other similar stories we are told that we are destined to live perfect and happy lives. We are certain that even if things are not going right at the moment, they will eventually. We want it no other way. Everything will fit together. As adults we may be able to separate ourselves from the characters of these fairytale stories. But has the desire for the perfect existence remained?

Take our view on leadership. It would appear that we want leaders who with simple grace and flawless skill lead us perfectly. (Exceptions make the evening news.) Books on leadership tend to support and promote this idea. Books focusing on larger than life individuals abound—*George Washington on Leadership* (Brookhiser, 2008); *John F. Kennedy on Leadership* (Barnes, 2005); *Jack Welch on Leadership* (Slater & Welch, 2004); *Churchill on Leadership* (Hayward, 2004); *Lincoln on Leadership* (Phillips, 1993); *A Higher Standard of Leadership, Lessons from the Life of Gandhi* (Nair, 1994); *Shakespeare on Leadership* (Talbot, 1994); *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* (Roberts, 1990); *Shackleton: Leadership Lessons From Antarctica* (Ainsberg, 2008); *Make It So: Leadership Lessons From Star Trek the Next Generation* (Ross & Roberts, 1995); and *The Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus* (Harvey, Cottrell, & Lucia, 2004)—just to name a few. It will not take long to discover that many

leadership books leave you feeling that the greats live lives not dissimilar to the fairytale individuals we mentioned earlier. They live perfectly, they have extraordinary experiences, make phenomenally good decisions and are unqualified successes.

The problem arises when we benchmark our lives with these greats. We find that in the real world life is generally not perfect, that we have to work hard at what we do and sometimes we are not successful. This raises a cluster of unhelpful questions. Do I need to try harder? Am I not good enough? And in the realm of religious leadership, has God abandoned me? Let me suggest an alternative viewpoint. It might just be that the stories of “great leaders,” as well as the fairytales, are partially, if not entirely, untrue. Perhaps the problem is the definition of success and what counts for “happily ever after.” For us it might be more profitable to talk, not about success and happiness, but how we now respond to and deal with the call to leadership. We might discover some very interesting ideas. We might even be surprised. We want heroes and we want them to fit neatly into current theories with perfect endings. But the truth may be not be so clear cut.

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Where can we find unvarnished stories of leadership, some stories that charm us but that tell us the truth? The biblical book of Judges is a collection of such stories. The theme of the book developed in a series of stories is this: the Israelites sin, they are subjected to slavery, they cry to the Lord, and He raises up a deliverer. The interesting thing about each story is that an unexpected leader emerges and somehow plays a role in effecting God’s will. It makes an unusual list of heroes and role models. None of them are perfect, but

each one helps liberate Israel in an unusual way: a left-handed man with a short dagger, a woman who uses the only thing at hand (a tent peg), a shy man with trumpets and 300 men shouting, a woman who dropped a millstone over the wall, and a blind man brought in as part of the entertainment at a banquet who pushed down the walls. These don’t fit into the usual leadership pattern. For each leader the perfect ending is elusive. Several go into hiding and others run away. Self doubt remains and, for at least one, death is the immediate reward. From their initial qualifications they would not have made the short list for “great leaders.” None were chosen for natural ability (or even good looks) but for one reason only: God’s purpose.

Compare this to many leadership stories that are benchmarked against personal success, “the happily ever after” goal. *Jack Welch and the G.E. Way* (Slater, 1998) is such a book. It describes the life of Jack Welch, of how successful he was, of his abilities, skills, and decision-making. It has often been touted as the measure of leadership. But there has been a change of tone (Morris, 2006). Some are beginning to question this and to suggest among other things that his apparent success may be more a coincidence of time and place than personal ability. In many ways G.E. was successful, but the emphasis on personal success has been shown to be questionable.

Returning to some well-known biblical stories which feature the “greats” of the past, we find unusual twists on personal success. These stories help us as leaders, not in developing successful strategies or personal leadership styles, but in understanding our human condition as leaders. We may have grown to demand perfect personal success from our leaders. We may have assumed that for ourselves as leaders. But is this reality or just a fairytale?

Several stories of well-known leaders raise the question about personal success. Jonah is called to take on a leadership role which he is reluctant to assume. He runs away but is rescued, returned, and once again assigned the same task. In the end the task is completed with phenomenal success. Jonah might have been content to “live happily every after” and to accept this success with joy, particularly considering his earlier direct disobedience. But as the story ends, he is not happy. He is angry, depressed and argumentative. Elijah, after the major success at a very public event on Mount Carmel, receives personal death threats and runs away into hiding. His “happily every after” turns out to be total exhaustion, personal fear and doubt. Unaware even of his own needs at the moment, he is miraculously feed, rested and reminded of loyalty. Isaiah hears the very voice of God, volunteers to go for him and is given by God the gift of preaching—a scenario that should guarantee success. The results would have to have a perfect ending. But Isaiah is told in clear terms that after a lifetime of preaching, the results would be absolutely nothing, “a nation of stumps.”

David, after being appointed by God and serving a lifetime of leadership, is forced to leave Jerusalem during a coup led by his own son. As he is leaving, Shimei sees David approaching and begins cursing him and throwing stones. Some loyal soldiers ask David for permission to cut off his head, but David says, “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to.” This low moment in personal success is laid out plainly. “So David and his men continued along the road while Shimei was going along the hillside opposite him, cursing as he went and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt. The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted” (2 Samuel 16:13-14).

One of the all-time greats, Moses, was given the task to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. It took him forty years to complete the task that could have been accomplished much more quickly and then, at the point of death, he was not even allowed to finish the work. This short list of leaders are our role models, heroes who found themselves exhausted, discouraged, angry and sometimes left with nothing to show for their efforts. These stories fail to have the “happily ever after” ending, but they do sounds much more like our lives than the perfect hero of the great leader books or someone in a fairytale. But can we just leave it there? Can we live with a life that is not going to end like a fairytale?

Let me suggest a possibility. Although most useful in difficult and complicated situations, it is simple. It brings meaning in the midst of failure; it brings hope at a point of discouragement. It is God’s principle for us in a single concept, in a single word—the word “yet.” It may be found in several other parallel words or phrases such as *but, despite, still, even, until now, up to this point*. It appears frequently throughout the

Bible, often in the Psalms. The pattern is consistent. Conditions are terrible, “yet” God does something: “yet we are comforted” and “yet we are remembered.” Sometimes the word is used, sometimes just the concept. Psalms 23 is a great example. I walk through the valley of death, “yet” you are with me. I am surrounded by enemies, “yet” you prepare a table. Psalm 31 describes a desperate personal situation, one in which leaders may at times find themselves in sympathy. My eyes are dimmed with grief. I stumble. There is disease in my bones. My neighbors find me a burden and my friends shudder at me. The Psalmist goes on. At this very moment, in spite of everything, he finds the “yet.” “Yet I put my trust in thee. You are my God, my fortunes are in your hand.” Psalm 106 outlines the history of Exodus. The Israelites fail to remember God’s many acts of faithful love and rebel at the Red Sea. Forgetful and rebellious? “Yet” the Lord delivers them for His name’s sake and looks with pity on their distress.

Leaders may find in private reflection or public performance a time when the fairytale is not working. It might be a moment of self-realization or in a chorus of voices. At this point the heroic leader model is not working. We discover that leadership and life are not neatly packaged. What keeps a leader going at a time like this? A student of mine once asked for help on a particular issue and concluded his email with the phrase, “do the needful.” He was saying, do what is right, do it because it needs being done, don’t fret about the consequences, don’t worry about the ending. It was good advice for me at that moment and I have since thought about its applications in other leadership situations.

We conclude, then, that the way forward for leaders today, as in the past, is simply facing up to the truth. Forget trying to be the hero—Jack Welch might have been coincidence; “happily ever after” is a fairytale. Don’t worry about your own abilities—God chooses for his purpose, not our abilities. Do the needful with what you have at hand whether it be (metaphorically) a short dagger, a millstone, some trumpets, or a push on the pillars. And above all, remember the principle of “yet.” In one more illustration, the Psalmist describes a situation in which, despite his best efforts, he is punished every morning. (Leadership feels like that sometimes.) At the turning point of the psalm, he reasons from his life experiences that despite these feelings there is a “yet” that takes him beyond this point. He concludes, “yet I am always with thee” (Psalm 73). In other words, we are never alone.

Life is not a fairytale; there are moments when not everything is perfect. But in spite of and perhaps in the face of that, there is the moment, the voice, the task, that calls us to step forward and “do the needful.” Moses was loyal to the voice from the burning bush, Isaiah loyal to the voice in the vision. A leader’s success and happiness is measured not on personal abilities or good looks, but on the loyalty to the call of leadership, a loyalty that lasts a lifetime, or in other words, “ever after.”

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